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Restoring Hope Tote

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Columbia College Chicago

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Restoring Hope Tote

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At Columbia College Chicago collaboration is at the core of our curriculum. By integrating service learning experiences into the curriculum, students from CCC's Fashion Studies Department (Fashion Business and Fashion Design) are given opportunities to engage in meaningful involvement, which makes for deeper connections within their community and disciplines. Last spring, one such organization Re:new, a local not for profit agency that provides training and employment opportunities to refugee women living in the Chicago area became a partner with both Fashion Business and Fashion Design students. At Re:new, women learn and improve their sewing skills, gain workplace experience, and are able to practice the English language in a safe environment. Some gain employment with Re:new producing a collection of handbags, which are sold online, and at their flagship studio and store. Customers are encouraged to "be a messenger of change, carry the story of refugees in your community".

Though Re:new's business was growing, an on going challenge identified by the organization was the need to attract a younger demographic. By partnering with Fashion Studies, a cross disciplinary approach involved Fashion Design students with a bag design competition, and Fashion Business students, as part of their capstone course, devoted an entire semester to research, marketing and facilitating the competition. As a result, "Restoring Hope Tote by Tote: A Handbag Design Contest" was created.

Since Re:new uses almost exclusively donated materials in their bags, the challenge was to design a bag that can be produced in a variety of fabrics and keep within a budget (\$15) and time constraints (must be sewn in less than 60 minutes). The contest also stipulated that the bag must include leather, hardware, or metal somewhere in the design. A workshop was held to assisted students with design and presentation.

Hannah Linder, a sophomore in Fashion Design, created the winning design chosen by a committee of Re:new staff and board members. Hannah's bag stood out from the rest of the designs submitted with her clever transformation from a simple tote to a backpack. Her utilitarian design included leather straps, swivel clasps, d-rings and pockets. On several

occasions Hannah visited Re:new, working with the pattern maker and sample sewer to create the first prototype. The finished bag was added to Re:new's Fall Collection 2014 and is currently featured on their website. The bag was renamed Nam Yo, which means two ways in Burmese.



The all-inclusive nature of the project has been at the center of this successful collaboration. Beginning with the business students' research, defining who and what the target market is and stipulating those findings within the competition, organizing and facilitating the contest. The design students incorporated their own research into their vision and presentations. The entire staff (which included refugee women artisans) voted on the design they thought most appropriate. Ending with Hannah working with the production team at Re:new finalizing the design before it's launch and finally the customers, reacting positively to the bag with their purchase.